



CONGREGATION AGUDATH JACOB

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From the Desk of
Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner



Why Pray?

And How can Prayer Help us Transform our Lives?

One of the most moving stories of prayer in the Hebrew Bible is the story from the Book of Samuel which tells of a young woman named Hannah whose life was filled with love and filled with sorrow.

Hannah was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. We hear in the story that Hannah was Elkanah's favorite wife, but we also hear that she was barren – she could not bear children.

In contrast, Penina, Elkanah's other wife, was the mother of many sons and daughters. We sense immediately that this is a family in pain. There is a beloved wife who watches in grief as she sees another woman bearing children for the man she loves.

There is an unloved wife who bears children for a man who is in love with somebody else.

Each year, Elkanah took his family to the Temple in Shiloh to bring the first fruits of their harvest as an offering to G-d.

Each year, Penina took the opportunity to make Hannah feel inadequate for her inability to bear a child.

Peninah would say, “Look, Elkanah has given me so much food from the harvest to share with my children, but poor, childless Hannah only has her one meager portion.”

Hannah just couldn’t take it any longer.

One year, when at Shiloh, she entered the Temple and stood before the altar of the G-d of Israel.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she silently prayed for a child — a child who would fulfill her dreams of motherhood and who would end her years of humiliation.

Her lips trembled as she quietly made her petition to G-d.

The priest, Eli, saw this young woman with a ravaged face prostrate in the Temple.

He saw her clothes, rumpled from lying on the ground.

He saw her mouth opening and closing noiselessly. All he could think was, “Who has let this drunken harlot into my Temple?”

Eli said to Hannah, “How long will you be a drunkard? Get rid of that wine you’ve been drinking!”

Hannah, startled by the priest’s accusation, turned to Eli and protested, “Oh, no, sir! I am no drunkard. I don’t drink wine or strong drink at all!

The only drink I have poured is my own heart, which I am opening to God in prayer.

Please, do not take me for some kind of a fallen woman. All this time I have only been praying a prayer of my anguish.”

Eli recognized in Hannah’s tears, that she was not what he had first imagined. He regretted how quickly he had judged her, and now spoke to her with kindness.

“Well, then. May you go in peace. And may the G-d of Israel grant the request that you have made here.”

The Bible tells us that Hannah’s prayer soon was answered. She returned to her home and became pregnant.

Her son would grow up to be Samuel, the great prophet who anointed both King Saul and King David, Israel’s first two kings.

On one level, the story could be read as one in which Hannah makes a bargain with G-d — “If you give me a son, I will dedicate him to You.”

G-d takes the deal and rewards Hannah with a son.

It is a familiar story and there are many like it in Jewish tradition and in folklore from around the world. Samuel is the “miracle baby” who is destined for greatness.

However, like many legends, it should not be read only on that literal level alone.

The point of the story is not that, if you pray hard enough, G-d will fulfill your lofty dreams. If that were true, then the opposite also would have to be true — if you have not received the things in life you deeply desire or need, it must be because you are not praying hard enough.

Imagine for a moment, what a message that would send to the many “Hannah”s in the world today – women who struggle with infertility.

Let us be true to the text. The story is about something deeper.

It is about the human need to express ourselves to eternity.

It is a story about prayer as an expression of our deepest yearnings and highest aspirations.

It is a story of **how prayer can help us transform our lives.**

There is something within almost all human beings, I think, that makes us want to be heard. We want, as Hannah wanted, to speak the great truths of our lives into this awesome Universe.

Even if we recognize that our lives are brief and our needs are petty compared to the vastness of time and space, we still need to shout out our unique selves and affirm that our pain and our joy, our sorrow and our celebration, our gratitude and our awe, all matter and have meaning. **That is the essence of what prayer is about.**

The Rabbis of the Talmud, who lived about a thousand years after Hannah’s time, regarded her prayer as the great example of everything that prayer should be.

From the verse that says that “Hannah spoke ***Al Libah***” — meaning that she spoke “to herself,” or more literally, “upon her heart” — the Talmud says that prayer should be “from the heart,” done mindfully with purpose and intention.

In the words of Rabbi Eliezer in the Mishnah, “Anyone who will only pray a fixed prayer has not really prayed to G-d at all” (Tractate Berachot 4:4). Prayer must be an act of the heart before it is an act of the mouth.

From the verse that says that Hannah’s lips moved as she prayed, the Talmud concludes that we should make every effort to pray with words. It is not enough to just think about our deepest hopes and highest aspirations, we must actually try to express them in words.

There is something about putting our best and most soul-shattering thoughts into words that helps us hear them.

Without words, our prayers remain muffled and drowned out by the roar of our busy lives by the internal chatter of our restless minds.

The Talmud observes that Hannah prayed silently so that only she could hear her prayer.

The Rabbis said that this shows that prayer should not be ostentatious.

It does not need to be shouted or turned into a display of false piety. Rather, prayer is a quiet experience, soft enough for us to be able to hear our own souls speaking [Tractate Berachot 31a].

The Rabbis of the first century of the common era had other reasons, too, to like the story of Hannah's prayer and to make it their model for ideal prayer.

The story's conflict between Hannah and the priest, Eli, resonated with them as a metaphor for Israel's transition from worship through sacrificial offerings to worship through words.

While the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem under the leadership of priests like Eli, worshipping G-d primarily meant bringing offerings of animals, fruits, grains and vegetables to the Temple to be burnt upon the altar. Worshipping G-d through prayer existed in the time of the Temple, but it was not until after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE that prayer became Judaism's exclusive means of worship.

The story about Eli, the priest, and Hannah, the woman in prayer, might have reminded the Rabbis of Israel's transition from Temple sacrifices to synagogue prayers.

The Rabbis also identified with Hannah because the Bible depicts her just as the Rabbis saw themselves — sincere, humble, heartbroken, and loyal to her G-d.

Her earnest and heartfelt prayer reminded the Rabbis how they viewed spoken prayer not as a pale substitute for sacrifices, but as, in every way, the equal of the sacrificial rites of the Holy Temple.

As the centuries passed, the idea of prayer as a replacement for Temple sacrifices faded. By the medieval era, the Temple and its rites were thought of, as a practice from a long-ago time, without much pertinence to their own day.

When medieval Jewish thinkers wanted to convince their fellow Jews of the importance of prayer, they hardly ever referred to prayer as a substitute for sacrifices.

Maimonides, the pre-eminent Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, wrote that the purpose of the daily fixed prayers was for our own growth, **not for G-d's benefit**.

He said that the practice of prayer trains our minds and hearts in the values that the prayers talk about — love of G-d, ethical behavior, compassion, reverence and humility.

Maimonides saw prayer as a discipline that Jews accept as a daily reminder to live according to the highest values and principles of Jewish belief.

At about the same time, Jewish mysticism developed a different way to think of prayer.

To the kabbalists, the fundamental purpose of life is to act as G-d's partner in repairing a world that is broken and shattered.

Kabbalah claims that we can help repair the universe by becoming aware of G-d's hidden presence in the world and releasing that presence by performing Mitzvot.

According to Jewish mysticism, when Jews pray, we are not just reciting wise and edifying words, **we are uncovering the hidden divinity that is within our souls.**

Prayer helps us to release divine hidden sparks to help repair the world.

By looking at the history of Jewish worship, we see that there is no one way, in which Jews have understood prayer.

There has been an evolution in Jewish thinking over time and there have been — even in a single age — a diversity of ways for Jews to understand what we are doing when we pray.

And what of us today? What do we believe we are doing when we pray? That is a difficult question for us to answer because many of us come to Synagogue services unaccustomed to prayer in any form, or for any reason.

We may fall easily back into the habit that many of us have known from childhood of singing along with the congregation or of reading the words in the prayer book.

But many of us do so without a clear answer to the “why” question.

Why do we pray? Why is it important to us? Why should we keep doing it?

We have a great deal to gain by finding a way to understand prayer as a meaningful experience. I believe that we need prayer, as much as any generation before us, to express ourselves and the meaning of our lives to the world and its Creator. I believe that we can improve our lives by finding a discipline of prayer that works for us.

Here is a way of thinking about prayer that I believe can work for us. In the twenty-first century, prayer can be our way to find our way back to who we really are in a society that tries so hard to make us into something else.

We are living in an age in which we are bombarded by messages, commercials or adds about what we are supposed to want. Whether we are told to want money, power, ice cream, an iPhone, or a really killer set of abs — it’s hard not to feel confused in a society that seems obsessed with the trivial and in which it is so difficult to find clear statements of what is truly meaningful and fulfilling in life.

As a result, many people feel disconnected from their values and many struggle to find a higher purpose in their lives.

Prayer for us can be a way to quiet the voices that tell us what we should crave, and focus our attention, instead, on the things that really make life fulfilling: loving relationships, meaningful work, a sense of purpose, dedication to our Torah values, and a sense of wonder for the Divine and miraculous world around us.

Let me give you some specific examples of the prayers in our Jewish tradition that help us to do this.

We have prayers in Jewish liturgy that are about recognizing our physical, bodily needs. In the morning service, we recite blessings for getting up out of bed in the morning, (the **Modeh Ani**) for getting dressed, and even for the ability to use the bathroom (the **Asher Yatsar**). We use prayer as a way of staying in touch with the sanctity of our bodies and our physical needs, which are the foundation for all of our other needs.

We also have many prayers in Jewish liturgy that are about the need to bring justice and righteousness into the world.

These prayers seem designed to lift our thoughts beyond our physical needs and into an awareness that we live in a moral universe that is shaped by our Torah principles and ideals.

These prayers energize our desire to make the world a better place for ourselves, our families and communities.

They remind us to live for those principles and values, not just for fulfilling our cravings and desires.

Many of our prayers call us to think about our gratitude for the miracle of just being alive.

These prayers turn our thoughts away from our momentary desires and into the realm of awe and reverence.

We reflect on how we fit into the big picture of a world that we did not create. We open our minds to the obligations that accompany the gift of our existence — what we owe to others and what we owe to ourselves. In prayer, we stand before the Shechinah, G-d's Divine Presence and feel ourselves to be a small part of an eternity that stretches beyond our imagination.

In that moment, we can rediscover the comfort, joy and equanimity of belonging in the universe. We remember that the meaning of our lives is part of the universe's meaning — that our lives matter.

Now, I want to ask you something.

How would your life change if you took the time on a regular basis to remind yourself — no matter how crazy the world around you may get — that there is a meaning and purpose to your life?

How would you, as a person, change if you regularly and intentionally reminded yourself that your life is actually a mission to honor your highest values, to make the world around you a better place, and to lovingly care for others?

How would the way you think about yourself change if you regularly took the time to develop a sense of inward peace?

This is why, I believe, we can benefit from developing a prayer practice in our lives — it has the potential to awaken our hearts to the things that really matter to us.

It can help us join with others to make our community a healthier and kinder place. It can make us happier.

Hannah offered her prayer for a child in a private and spontaneous moment.

She had no need of a prayer book to find the right words to say to G-d. All she had to do was to **open her heart** and allow her powerful feelings to flow out of her.

That quiet place of the soul where our deepest yearnings live is the place that we can touch and release in prayer.

Prayer does not require a prayer book (a Siddur), or a prescribed formula to work, but many people find that fixed prayers help them find the words that express what they feel in their hearts.

Prayer can happen in the Synagogue during regular worship times, or it can happen while we are walking in the woods. It can even happen while we are standing on the check-out line in the supermarket.

All it takes is the determination to listen to the yearnings of our own souls in a focused and disciplined way.

If you are feeling right now that you are unequal to the task of taking on a prayer practice. If part of you is saying, "Yes, that sounds like it would be good for someone else, but I'm not that kind of person," I want to let you know that it doesn't really matter what kind of person you are.

Psalms 69 contains a verse (v. 14) that appears at the beginning of the traditional morning service: "*Va'ani t'filati l'cha, Ado-nai.*" **ואני תפילתי לך ה'** Literally, the verse can be read to mean: "I am my prayer to You, Ado-nai." The verse reminds us that all we can really offer when we pray is ourselves — I am my prayer — and that is enough.

We do not need to pretend to be someone else when we pray.

We do not need to approach G-d as if we were saying, "G-d, I'm not really a good enough person to be talking to You. I'm not religious enough; I don't believe in You enough. I'm actually kind of embarrassed just to be talking to You." None of that is necessary, thank G-d.

If it were, no one would ever be able to utter a single word of sincere prayer.

"*Ani T'filati,*" **אני תפילתי** "*I am my prayer,*" means that your best prayer is the one that comes from you just as you are. Always remember that you have a G-dly spark in you, that Pintele Yid.

You are already good enough. You don't have to be someone else in order to express your pain, your joy, your hopes and your disappointments to the world.

Doing so, just as you are, can do for you what it did for Hannah.

It can make you feel heard. It can make you feel that your life matters, that your sorrow has dignity, and that your gratitude for what life has given you can help you better enjoy life.

It can bring you a sense of inner peace when you are surrounded by turmoil and it can give you strength to face life's toughest moments.

I am my prayer. I am the very thing that I need to say to eternity, and I feel that eternity answers back to me in the quiet and moving moments of my life.

Today, and every day, is, I sincerely believe, an opportunity for each of us to re-evaluate our relationship to prayer. Maybe this is the first time you have sat in a Synagogue using a prayer book that talks about G-d in a way that seems approachable.

Or, maybe you are ready to think of prayer as being more like a poem than like a rigid legal formula. Maybe this Siddur has you ready to think about how you can be your own prayer.

As we go through every day's busy schedule of just "living" life, I would like to invite you to try praying like you've never prayed before.

Pray as a way of uncovering the things in life that you are truly grateful for.

Pray as a way of discovering your sense of your life's mission and purpose.

Pray, like Hannah did, as a way of opening up the places where you feel wounded, vulnerable and in pain.

My hope for you, is that your prayer be a source of meaning, joy, discovery, healing and a true intimate connection with Almighty G-d of Israel.

At the particular moment that you are reading this article of mine, today, this moment, make the choice to include some kind of prayer practice and Meditation in your life on a more regular basis.

At first, it could be just a moment to look up to Heaven while you're waiting on the grocery check-out line just to say, "Thank you G-d." I am truly Blessed!

It could be including a moment of gratitude for your food before you dig in.

It could be a moment to sing *Shema* with your child before tucking her or him in at night.

It could be a moment to hope for the wellbeing of the people you love as you lie down to sleep at night.

Or, if you want to go a little further and deeper realizing a much greater purpose of being ever closer and intimate with G-d, you might take the suggestion of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, the 17th century world renowned Chassidic Sage, and meditate in *Hitbodedut*, in seclusion, preferably in nature, for a while, and discover this awesome relationship which every Jewish Soul has with His Creator.

Try it. You might find that it eases your pain, gives you a sense of purpose and direction, helps you find your higher Mission in life, helps you feel heard in a noisy world.

It may make you feel like you can finally hear yourself and hear G-d's prayer answering you. How awesome would that be?

Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner



PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Since October 7, 2023, the world has done all in its power to tell us who we are, and has attempted to rewrite our history to support the deceitful narrative that it has constructed. Almost all of us at *shul* likely recognize these lies. But so many others, not just uninformed gentiles but secular and unaffiliated Jews, and especially younger Jews ignorant of Jewish history and ashamed of their Jewish identity, have fallen prey and willingly adopted the identity thrust upon them by the forces which hope to destroy us.

It can be difficult for us to speak to such folks, imploring them not to be beholden to the latest propaganda bombarding us in social media and from so-called news sources. I say that because I am not sure if it's possible for these uninformed souls to comprehend what is occurring in Israel and for Jews worldwide without a grounding in our history and in our relationships with other nations. For the rest of us, nothing that we have witnessed is new or should be unexpected. The names, dates, locations, events, etc., are of course new, although the trends are not. But so many of our people—Jews by heritage only, perhaps with no connection either to our religion or to any Jewish institutions or communities—seem clueless. They willingly support individuals and movements that defame us with lies and seek our destruction. I would imagine that many of us, unfortunately, know people just like this.

If one is an informed practicing Jew and observes what has been happening and is knowledgeable about Jewish history, then one can recognize in today's current events familiar patterns from the past centuries, from 2000 years ago, and from even further back. Yet without a requisite knowledge of Jewish history, as is seemingly becoming less commonplace among younger Jews, how can such individuals ever kick out of the sick fantasy world about our people that they have become immersed in? What can the rest of us do to repair the void in our people's collective knowledge of Jewish history? Because I am a professor, I still hold to the conviction that uninformed people can be reached and ignorance can be vanquished. Whether I am correct in this belief or this is just wishful thinking, I am choosing to be hopeful.

A great first step in upping our own ability to be sources of truth is to find a good book of Jewish history and read it. There are so many out there to choose from, and in fact we have many here in our *shul* library. I challenge each of us to look into these and find one that you'd like to read. This would make a good summer reading project!

Some great works of Jewish history that come to mind that are in my own library at home and that I have learned from include Paul Johnson's *A History of the Jews*, Martin Goodman's *A History of Judaism*, Cecil Roth's *A History of the Jews*, Goldberg & Rayner's *The Jewish People*, Abraham Heschel's *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*,

Robert Seltzer's *Israel: A People and Its History*, Frederick Schweitzer's *A History of the Jews Since the First Century A.D.*, Max Dimont's *Jews, G-d and History*, and on and on. Some of these are contemporary works. Earlier 19th- and 20th-Century histories, many of them celebrated titles that have educated Jews for decades, can be found in the *shul* library. Examples include historical books by Howard Sachar, Rufus Lears, Solomon Grayzel, Abram Sachar, Margolis & Marx, and Joseph Halpern. Karen Alpert is doing a terrific job organizing our library space and its book collection, and I'd encourage everyone to consider finding something there to check out and read. A great starting point and a highly recommended work of which our library has several copies is the Dimont book.

An especially useful and concise source focused specifically on our religion, and not just our people, is the various historical chapters in the *Introduction to the Talmud* volume of Artscroll's terrific Schottenstein edition of the Talmud Bavli. Collectively, this work narrates the chronological history of the developments leading to the creation of the rabbinic literature, from the giving of Torah on Sinai through the emergence of the Mishnah, Tosefta, both Talmuds, and early Midrash volumes. I don't believe that we have this in our library at *shul*, but it's worth searching for and reading. Alternatively, for those interested more in the content of this literature, I'd recommend anything by Jacob Neusner, such as his *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, from the Anchor Bible series. Finally, I'm sure that Rabbi Lanxner could recommend all sorts of titles, from the popular to the scholarly, from the historical to the biographical, and from social and cultural histories to religious collections.

Learning is an essential value for us, and indeed is among the greatest of our *mitzvot*. Whenever in the past our people were decimated by our enemies, we survived because our history and memories and, especially, Torah learning survived, often at great cost to those who had to hide these efforts from the secular authorities. G-d forbid that we may be entering such a time again. But do realize that because we preserved our history and our commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, and passed it down to those who came after, Judaism and the Jewish people continued to reestablish a foothold and continue to flourish. This has happened repeatedly throughout our history. As long as knowledge of who we are survives, and as long as we maintain our commitment to Torah and *mitzvot*, we will survive. The more we learn about how our people struggled and overcame, the better we will be able to convey this message to those among our people who have little or no idea about any of this and have defaulted to the false history constructed by our enemies.

L'shalom,
Jeff Levin

July Service Schedule

Friday, July 3

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	8:20 pm

Saturday, July 4

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	9:19 pm

Friday, July 10

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	8:18 pm

Saturday, July 11

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	9:17 pm

Friday, July 17

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	8:16 pm

Saturday, July 18

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	9:14 pm

Friday, July 24

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	8:12 pm

Saturday, July 25

Shacharit	10:00 am
Shabbat Ends	9:10 pm

Friday, July 31

Kabbalat Shabbat	6:00 pm
Candle Lighting	8:07 pm



July 1

Henry Hacker

July 13

Jasmine Presser

July 14

Karen Alpert

July 23

Elaine Slansky

July 25

Kam Bauer

July 26

Inez Bonneville

July 29

Clair Padgett

July 2

Richard & Karen Alpert

July 3

Rabbi & Susan Lanxner

July 23

Semyon & Anna Papernov

July 28

Dr Jeff and Dr Lea Levin



THANK YOU for your donations in June!

In Memory of

Isadore Budin

Florence Hersh

Judy Hersh

Harriet Stupak

Harry Harelík

Marsha Lev

Killian Michlowitz

Barbara Dankenbring

Motley Harelík

Harry Harelík

Dorothy Gulman

Jeff Levin

AJ Farmer

Paul & Paula Farmer



The following names of dearly departed will be read aloud by the Rabbi preceding the Mourner's Kaddish on Shabbat morning. It is fitting and customary that the nearest of kin be present in the synagogue for the recitation of this special prayer in their memory. Attendance not only honors the departed but also enhances and guarantees that a Minyan is present to recite the Kaddish.

Kaddish will be read on July 3

Tammuz 18	Annette Fox
	Eugene Gurkoff
Tammuz 19	Isaac Draiman*
	Louis Ringold*
Tammuz 20	Edwin Bernard Dreyfus
	Benson Offit
	John Perry
Tammuz 23	Claire Seriff
	Samuil Gordon
Tammuz 24	Max Israel*
	Mrs. M Novy*
	Morris Rubinsky*

Kaddish will be read on July 10

Tammuz 25	Kate Kahan
Tammuz 26	Isadore F Aronson*
	Sidney Lynn*
Tammuz 27	Herma Benjamin
Tammuz 28	Ida Budin*
	Edna Levy
	Mose Genecov*
Av 1	Rudolph Genecov
	Rev Samuel Levy*
Av 2	Ilona Eleanor Belove*
	Hyman Frindell*
	David Segal

Kaddish will be read on July 17

Av 3	Kalman Solovey*
Av 4	Evelyn Hoffman*
	Mrs. Sam Koenigheit
	Bessie Tobolowsky
Av 5	Abe Ellis
	Barry Phillips
	Josephine Ringold
Av 6	Charles Brodkey
	Gussie Rosenbaum
	Emanuel Rubel

Av 7	Alek Genecov*
	Rachel Goodman*
	Pat Henry Howeth
Av 8	M Cohen*
	Betty Levy
Av 9	Mark Emanuel Wolf*

Kaddish will be read on July 24

Av 10	B M Goodman*
Av 11	Mr. Samuel Lynn*
	Benjamin V Schiller, Jr
	Elliot Wolpo
Av 12	Sol Kempler
	Hannah Rosenblatt
	Norman Smith*
	Gita Papernov
Av 13	Dolores Gurkoff
Av 14	Isaac Feldt*
Av 15	Charles Goldstein
	Haskell Harelik*
	Robert Mitchell
	Harvey Slutsky
Av 16	Mamie Commer*
	Isador Ellis*

Kaddish will be read on July 31

Av 18	Joe Ellis
Av 19	Jacob (Jake) E Gandler*
	Alberta E Griffith Howeth
Av 20	Lee David Miller*
	Esther Samet*
	Charles I Silver*
	Ben Tobolowsky*
Av 21	Marilyn Ellis
	Mrs. Emma Lynn*
Av 22	Irwin "Buddy" Levy*
Av 23	Abe Berlowitz*

****Plaque on memorial wall.***